

The Good Shepherd

Does anyone detect a **theme** in today's Scripture readings?

That's right. Sheep. The Flock. The Shepherd.

Now ... how many of us have actually **seen** a live sheep? Maybe at the petting zoo? How about in a pasture? Have you also seen a shepherd at work? No?

It's really hard for us modern city residents to **really** understand what it is that our Scriptures have to say about sheep and shepherding, isn't it?

Back in biblical times, flocks of sheep and their shepherds were everyday experiences.

Back then even **kings** were intimately familiar with the pasturing of sheep! Remember King David? He was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons ... and he'd been left in the fields to care for the sheep. When the first seven were not found worthy, Samuel ordered Jesse to send for David ... who **was** found worthy to lead Israel!

Interesting, isn't it?

The shepherd was called to shepherd Israel!

And so it is that we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday here in Bartlett some three thousand years later.

The Good Shepherd ... our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ... the descendant of King David ... became **our** shepherd.

There is only one “Good Shepherd” but Jesus left other shepherds for His flock.

Peter, first among the Apostles, led Jesus’s sheep during the turbulent first years of the Church ... and was crucified – upside down – for his efforts. In today’s first reading from the Book of Acts, we see a much different Peter than we saw at the Crucifixion. The scared Peter who denied even knowing Jesus has now received the Gift of the Holy Spirit and, with it, confidence and conviction to go out and spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The followers of Jesus ... His sheep ... are called to listen to the voice of the shepherd ... to follow Jesus ... and to follow the voice of His shepherds here on Earth.

Sheep are, by their very natures, followers.

Most of us today, **don’t** like to think of ourselves as followers. Job applications ask us to list all the **leadership** positions we’ve held ... our **leadership** attributes ... and our potential for increased **leadership** ...

S.I. McMillen tells a story about a young woman who wanted to go to college.

As usual, she began to fill out the application ... but her heart sank when she reached the inevitable question on the form that asked, "Are you a leader?" Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "**No**," and returned the document, expecting the worst.

To her surprise, she received an acceptance letter from the school!

It read: "Dear Applicant: A study of this year's applications reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting **you** because we feel it is **imperative** that they have at least **one** follower."

It's true that most of us like to style ourselves as leaders but if truth be told the vast majority of us are **not**.

Outside of parenthood, and perhaps military service, we are rarely placed into positions of ultimate responsibility and care over others.

Jesus recognizes that we are, by **our** natures followers ... that we need those over us to care for us. Sheep are followers. They follow the voice of the one they know ... their shepherd. **We** recognize Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

And like any shepherd, he would never leave us to face the wild beasts alone.

He left **us** a shepherd here on Earth. And **we** know his voice.

The shepherd he appointed over the Church is our Pope, Benedict XVI.

And his predecessor, Blessed John Paul II, when he was Pope, appointed Bishop Terry Steib to guide us here in West Tennessee.

Bishop Terry assigned yet another to watch over us here at St. Ann in Bartlett ... our Pastor – which means shepherd – Fr. Russ Harbaugh.

These shepherds guide us and help us to avoid the dangers of the wild beasts of the modern world and the self-pleasing voices of greed, lust, envy and the rest of the cacophony of false voices.

EWTN once did a parody on the 23rd Psalm which went:

The TV is my shepherd I shall not want,

It makes me to lie down on the sofa.

It leads me away from the faith,

It destroys my soul.

It leads me to the path of sex and violence for the advertiser's
sake.

Even though I walk in the shadow of Christian responsibilities,

There will be no interruption, for the TV is with me.

Its cable and remote control, they comfort me

It prepares a commercial for me in the midst of my worldliness

And anoints my head with secular humanism and consumerism.

My covetousness runs over;

Surely ignorance and laziness shall follow me all the days of my

life,

And I shall dwell in the house of wretchedness watching TV

forever.

This sounds dreadful doesn't it?

But it's a way of life that many of us ... and perhaps some of us here ... live
day in and day out.

But ... there is **another** way to live!

Remember today's Responsorial Psalm?

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

In verdant pastures he gives me repose;

beside restful waters he leads me;

he refreshes my soul.

He guides me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk in the dark valley

I fear no evil; for you are at my side.

With your rod and your staff that give me courage.

You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Only goodness and kindness follow me

all the days of my life;

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for years to come.

That's a beautiful way to live ... a way that leads to life, peace, and true happiness.

In today's Gospel John tells us that Jesus came **precisely** so that we may live that life, full of the peace and happiness described in the Psalm.

But where will **tomorrow's** shepherds come from?

Who will protect us from the “thieves and bandits” who would climb over the fence? Who might even pretend to be our friends but who are **users** whose primary purpose is to **harm** us?

These shepherds **must** come from **within** the flock!

Blessed John Paul II encouraged people many times during his pontificate to find life to the full by following Jesus.

In Palestine, the shepherd brought the sheep into the sheepfold every night. It was a circular stone wall with an opening where the sheep entered. Once the sheep were inside for the night the shepherd slept in that opening all night, guarding the sheep with his own life. The sheep couldn't get out without stepping over the shepherd ... which meant they would be safe throughout the night.

Jesus is the gate. Anyone who enters through him will be safe, and sure of finding pasture. Others steal and kill and destroy but Jesus is **our** shepherd ... the Good Shepherd.

As we contemplate Jesus's words on this Good Shepherd Sunday, our late Pope ... Blessed John Paul II ... declared the Fourth Sunday of Easter a Day of Prayer for Vocations.

Let us pray that many may listen to the voice of Jesus as he calls us by name, that we may enter the sheepfold through him and be safe and have life forever.

Where is **He** calling **you**?

Will **you** follow the sound of His voice?

END

Thanks to Rev. Fr. Tommy Lane for the idea of contrasting psalms.